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Reconstructing the canon: feminist experimental media

Justification

In research and writing on experimental film and video, and teaching in this area for 20 years, I've tried to seek out work by women and especially work that could be plausibly labelled "feminist" or perhaps "pre-feminist." Some of my motivation comes from attending some of the women's film festivals in the early and mid 70s and being thrilled by the discovery of films that had been left out of history and the canon. However, after an initial wave of recognition, many of these works have been unjustly neglected.

Perhaps this is not so surprising in terms of the experimental film world, which despite the work of feminist critics such as Lauren Rabinowitz (who has written a revisionist book on Maya Deren, Shirley Clarke, and Joyce Weiland), remains dominated by a masculine canon, especially in historical perspective. But it remains the case that some feminist critics are apparently ignorant of or uninterested in significant women's experimental work from the past, even when they address experimental film and video as a subject. (Patricia Mellencamp's **Indiscretions** would be a case in point)

I will consider a variety of reasons different feminist experimental works from the past have been neglected both by the experiential artworld and by feminist film critics. Specifically I will discuss Marie Menken's HURRY HURRY, Sara Kathryn Arledge's WHAT IS A MAN? and Gunvor Nelson and Dortothy Wiley's SCHMEERGUNTZ. I will briefly refer to a number of other works which are worthy of reconsideration as feminist experimental works. While part of my concern is to validate some specific works, the larger question I am concerned with is the problem of canon formation.

Abstract

Significant feminist experimental films and tapes have remained neglected by the experimental artworld and by feminist critics. Discussing several key examples, larger questions of canon formation and the direction of feminist critical thinking are addressed.